

New Realities of the Contemporary Novel

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to introduce some of the latest developments in the contemporary novel. In order to attain our goal, we shall proceed to firstly survey the cultural background, namely the (post)postmodernist period, then some tendencies concerning the literary genres, with an emphasis on three of the recent modes/genres – “hysterical realism”, “recherché postmodernism”, and the maximalist novel. In contemporary (literary) reality, the past is revisited, reconsidered, repeated, incorporated and modified, given a new meaning, and not necessarily imitated or copied, or negated; a reworking of the past to call for a new way of being in the future. The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first are characterized by an effusion of many new versions of realism, sometimes hybridized; the multi-faceted realism is a reality.

Keywords: post-postmodernism, “hysterical realism”, “recherché postmodernism”, the maximalist novel, the multi-faceted realism.

According to theorists, critics, historians and artists, the actual state of affairs in art (literature included), be it postmodernism, or post-postmodernism, digimodernism or pseudomodernism (Kirby 2009: 1) [1], automodernism (Samuels 2008: 219) [2], post-millennialism [3], altermodernism (Bourriaud 2009: 12) [4], metamodernism (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010) “oscillates between the modern and the postmodern, between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010), swings between past and present, between hysteria and paranoia. As Kirby (2009) puts it, living in our actual world became problematic, troublesome, tensioned, equally for both writers and readers:

[...] this fatalistic anxiety extends far beyond geopolitics, into every aspect of contemporary life; from a general fear of social breakdown and identity loss, to a deep unease about diet and health; from anguish about the destructiveness of climate change, to the effects of a new personal ineptitude and helplessness. [...] This pseudo-modern world, so frightening and seemingly uncontrollable, inevitably feeds a desire to return to the infantile playing with toys which also characterizes the pseudo-modern cultural world. Here, the typical emotional state, radically superseding the hyper-consciousness of irony, is the *trance* – the state of being swallowed up by your activity. In place of the neurosis of

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modernism and the narcissism of postmodernism, pseudo-modernism *takes the world away*, by creating a new weightless nowhere of silent autism. You click, you punch the keys, you are 'involved', engulfed, deciding. You are the text, there is no-one else, no 'author'; there is nowhere else, no other time or place. You are free: you are the text: the text is superseded (Kirby 2009).

To counter-act the "fatalistic anxiety" that extends over the tormented inhabitants of this "taken away" world in order to find a sense, a meaning and a place in the contemporary universe, we are free to deliberately step over the threshold of the fictional universe, bearing deeply in our hearts the hope of discovering either the peace of mind, or a potential solution to the devouring existentialist disquietude, as some of the novelistic worlds depicted in the (post)postmodernist books imitate or recreate the actual world. And there, between the lines, the apathetic, sceptic, *blasé* reader can decipher a solution of evading, even for brief periods of time, "far from the madding crowd", far from reality.

As Danuta Fjellestad and Maria Engberg (2012) insist in their study, "Toward a Concept of Post-Postmodernism or Lady Gaga's Reconfigurations of Madonna", a (re)turn from postmodern irony to post-postmodern realism seems to have taken place, probably as a stage in the cyclical emergence of the literary mode. Illustrative of the process is Keith Opdahl's opinion, cited by the two authors mentioned above, "the realistic novel has remained our single major literary mode for over 125 years, habitually springing back to outlast those movements that ostensibly buried it" (Opdahl 1987: 1-16 cited in Fjellestad and Engberg 2012).

Such being the case, the invitation to revisit the past (as professed by many theorists of the cultural phenomenon of post-postmodernity) – a nostalgic return towards older styles and genres in a new context (under the guise of the desire to return to the infantile playing with the toys) – is not surprising; therefore, the realist novel represents the choice for such an actuality.

In fact, realism has never ceased to exist, it is still alive within the broader fabric of contemporary fiction – it has only invested in other forms – practically, an amalgam of realisms, a remixed hybrid genre. We speak of types of realism with touches of postmodern self-consciousness; thus, we have magical, paranoid, "neurotic"[5], "hysterical realism", encapsulating therefore feelings, emotions, and affects, with an emphasis on "representing the world as we all more or less share" (McLaughlin 2004).

Although the novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shared the same view of the nature of reality, those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries consider that what constitutes reality is debatable, as David Lodge suggests, "to the later writers in the [realist] tradition what this world means is much more problematical", because "language does not so much mirror reality as use conventions to construct simulacra of what some readers can accept as reality (Lodge 1977: 47 cited in Holmes 2005: 18)."

A more simplified view on realism, “the persuasive mimesis of probable human activity”, seen as the central language of the novel, is that of James Wood: “Realism is not a law, but a lenient tutor, for it schools its own truants. It is realism that *allows* surrealism, magic realism, fantasy, dream, and so on” (Wood 2005). In one of his volumes of critical essays, *How Fiction Works* (2009), James Wood states that:

Realism is a “genre”; it is taken to be mere dead convention, and to be related to a certain kind of traditional plot, with predictable beginnings and endings; it deals in “round” characters, but softly and piously (“conventional humanisms”); it assumes that the world can be described, with a naively stable link between word and referent (“philosophically dubious”); and all this will tend toward a conservative or even oppressive politics (“politically . . . dubious”). [...] Barthes argued that there is no “realistic” way to narrate the world. The nineteenth-century author's naive delusion that a word has a necessary and transparent link to its referent has been nullified. [...] Realism does not refer to reality; realism is not realistic. Realism, said Barthes, is a system of conventional codes, a grammar so ubiquitous that we do not notice the way it structures bourgeois storytelling. Graham Greene effortlessly produces the kind of artful-but-natural “realism” that its opponents have in mind. [...] The style could be called commercial realism (Wood 2009: 171-173).

The critic's conclusions are based upon the analyses he made to a whole series of different authors, their style and techniques used, in order to prove that fiction is both artifice and verisimilitude. He argues once more that at the bottom of his enquiries lies *the real* (his emphasis), yet insisting upon the differences between realism and reality, realism and realistic.

Further on, Wood goes on with his point of view *vis-à-vis* realism, which he calls “liveness” and, at the same time, offers a word of advice for “the true writer”:

Realism, seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are, cannot be mere verisimilitude, cannot be mere lifelikeness, or lifesameness, but what I must call *liveness*: life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry. And it cannot be a genre; instead, it makes other forms of fiction seem like genres. For realism of this kind – liveness – is the origin. It teaches everyone else; it schools its own truants: it is what allows magical realism, hysterical realism, fantasy, science fiction, even thrillers, to exist. [...] The true writer, that free servant of life, is one who must always be acting as if life were a category beyond anything the novel had yet grasped; as if life itself were always on the verge of becoming conventional (Wood 2009: 186-187).

Wood, “the unabashed champion of realism” as Robbins maintains (2012), defends the literary mode in all his collections of critical essays, indirectly recommending to all the authors he reviewed and did not meet the demand of his guiding principle in writing – liveness – to comply with it and as such become true writers. Or, in order to describe life as it is, maybe writers should resort to “moderate realism”, a phrase coined by Coetzee, describing a way of writing in which the kind of detail we are directed to does not yet have the kind of extravagant

commitment to noticing and re-noticing, to novelty and strangeness, characteristic of modern novelists—an eighteenth-century regime, in which the cult of “detail” has not yet really been established (Wood, 2009: 74).

In 2001, reviewing Zadie Smith’s debut novel, *White Teeth*, the British writer and critic Wood coined the phrase “hysterical realism” in order to describe what he considered to be a literary mode/genre characterized by a strong contrast between the absurd, prolix prose and the action of the novel, or between the characters’ description and the attentive, detailed examination of the specific social phenomena. In his article, “Human, All Too Inhuman”, which was published by *The New Republic*, Wood introduced that phrase which denotes his conception on the “big, ambitious novel” (Wood 2001) “that pursues vitality at all costs” (Idem), and which “knows a thousand things, but does not know a single human being” (Wood 2001). In his own words: “In that essay I say something like they are not exactly stories that can never happen, because they do involve human beings, but they are in some way inhuman stories (cited in Birnbaum 2004).” He presents the genre as an attempt to “transform fiction into social theory” (Wood 2001) and of telling “how the world functions instead of telling us what does one feels about something” (Wood 2001). The critic considers Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon to be the pioneers of the genre, followed by David Foster Wallace and Salman Rushdie. Later on, Wood continues this idea in his collection of essays, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*, published in 2004, maintaining that: “The hysterical realism of such contemporary writers as Pynchon and Rushdie is the modern version of Sterne’s perpetual excitements and digressions.” (Wood 2005: 7).

Without defining the hysterical realism, James Wood insists on some of the particularities of this literary sub-mode/genre as resulted from the analysis of the texts of the above mentioned writers: an excess of main and secondary stories intertwining, doubling, even tripling on themselves (permanent story-telling, equivalent to a grammar structuring). The critic states that the principles of realism have not been abolished; on the contrary, they have been used and abused and as such, he does not object to matters of verisimilitude, but to those of morality. Accordingly, this style does not lack reality, *per contra*, it seems to escape reality, while it borrows from reality itself. The narrating mode seems incompatible with tragedy or moral suffering, the existence of vitality is taken for a drama of vitality. Narratives are excessively centripetal – the characters are always searching for connections, relations, patterns, and comparisons – and in that entire uninterrupted search there is something essentially paranoid as concerns the belief that everything is mutually determining and interacting. The characters are not really alive or fully human, yet they impose connections that, finally, are rather conceptual. What is missing is the humane, thus underlying the crisis of characters and the way they can be represented in literature, although the critic admits that since modernism, “many of the greatest writers have been offering critique and parody of the idea of character.” (Wood 2005: 105).

Having as a starting point the idea that beginning with John Dos Passos and Sinclair Lewis all the American writers (and not only them, it might be added) have been dreaming about the “Big Social Novel”, which strives to seize the times in order to form a document of the American history, Wood considers, though, that the dream about the big American novel has been resuscitated by Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), a novel with an epic social power. Subsequently to that, the critic maintains, all the young American writers emulated DeLillo, imitating his tentacular ambition, his effort in precisely defining an entire misconstrued culture, of being a great analyst of systems, crowds, and politics, of creating at the highest possible level, all being tributary to the “parent”, Charles Dickens in terms of long stories depicting all of society on its different levels, vivid external descriptions, “caricatural” characters (with the notable difference that Dickensian characters “feel and make us feel”). Far from being “big”, Wood insists that the contemporary novel is:

[...] a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity. It seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence – as it were, a criminal running endless charity marathons. Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page, as these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion. Inseparable from this culture of permanent storytelling is the pursuit of vitality at all costs (Wood 2001).

Responding to the British critic in the article “This is how it feels to me”, published in *The Guardian* in 2001, Zadie Smith, in her turn, describes hysterical realism as being “a painfully accurate term for the sort of overblown, manic prose to be found in novels like my own *White Teeth* and a few others he was sweet enough to mention” (Smith 2001). Smith accepted the term explaining the fact that, still, “any collective term for a supposed literary movement is always too large a net, catching significant dolphins among so much cannable tuna” (Smith 2001). Concerning the queries brought into discussion by the writer and critic Dale Peck to his contemporary fellow-authors, they are, to a great extent, similar to those of John Wood, only the denomination of the sub-mode being different – *recherché* postmodernism.

Peck insists that the maximalist novel (genre under which he frames the works of the analysed authors) is too long and too digressive, and that it is a novel about ideas and not about people, “solipsistic and impotent or unconscious and rarefied, written by recidivist realists who pretend the twentieth century didn’t happen” (cited in Kellaway 2003), with the difference that he considers it to be elitist, while Wood opines that it is not enough attenuated. The critic affirms that by means of his acid criticism “he’s saving the novel from its enemies, practitioners of ‘*recherché* postmodernism’, ‘recidivist realism’ – the elitist, esoteric, ‘exclusionary’ literature. [...] Their massive literary advances and domination of display and review space have crowded out competitors. The lavish praise critics bestow on contemporary fiction renders them complicit in its mediocrity.” (qtd. in Atlas 2004).

Peck is more concerned with the praise the authors receive on the part of the readers, and with the fact that they are so easily published and acclaimed, and sees only the zaniness, the slapstick, and “the same one-dimensional commentary on contemporary society”, taking into consideration the deeper, darker aspects of the works of the writers he tears to pieces; referring to Pynchon, for instance, he also says he dislikes the hallucinatory grandeur of his vision, being unimpressed by “a thirty year writing career [that] hasn’t produced a single memorable or even recognizably *human* character” (cited in Ketzan n.d.).

In *Hatchet Jobs: Writings on Contemporary Fiction* (2004), a collection of tendentious criticism, Dale Peck offers an assessment of the actual state of affairs of the American and British fiction. ‘There are’ he maintained ‘two strains of literature currently in vogue . . . *recherché* postmodernism and recidivist realism’. As Richard Bradford (2007: 70) states currently postmodernism equals realism in its capability to foil authenticity. Bluntly and undesignedly, Peck underlines the fact that postmodern writing is the victim of a self-created paradox: by means of anti-realism and by eschewing standardized mimesis and an obsessive concern with the nature of writing and representation it has become what its practitioners tried to avoid, a classifiable field and subgenre of literary writing.

According to James Atlas, Peck equally despises both canonical authors and his contemporaries. The modernist tradition, he argues:

began with the diarrheic flow of words that is *Ulysses*, continued on through the incomprehensible ramblings of late Faulkner and the sterile inventions of Nabokov, and then burst into full, foul life in the ridiculous dithering of Barth and Hawkes and Gaddis, and the reductive cardboard constructions of Barthelme, and the word-by-word wasting of a talent as formidable as Pynchon’s; and finally broke apart like a cracked sidewalk beneath the weight of the stupid – just plain stupid – tomes of DeLillo (Atlas 2003).

Reviewing Rick Moody’s *The Black Veil*, the critic also blames the readers for the state of affairs in literature:

[...] they, too, bear some responsibility for the condition of fiction – who have long since forgotten what the modernist and postmodernist assaults on linearity were actually about, and as such have lost the ability to tell the difference between ambiguity and inscrutability, ambition and bombast; of writers who are taken at face value when they are being ironic and who are deemed ironic when they are telling it straight – assuming, of course, that they themselves know the difference. Assuming, I should add, that they actually have a subject (Peck 2002).

Similarly, faithful to his distaste for too long and too digressive novels, he tears to pieces David Foster Wallace for his novel, *Infinite Jest*: “[...], most importantly, work up an elaborate – and elaborately digressive – plot which deliberately ends as unsatisfactorily as possible” (Peck 1996).

In *The Encyclopedia of the Twentieth Century Fiction*, Robert Rebein submits a definition of the concept of maximalism as opposed to minimalism: “maximalist fiction or maximalism denotes fictional works, particularly novels that are

unusually long and complex, digressive in style, and make use of a wide array of literary devices and techniques. Among the novelists associated with this style are David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, Rick Moody, William T. Vollmann, and, from a slightly older generation, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Paul West. In their separate ways, both minimalism and maximalism have been explained as responses to the declining relevance of literary fiction in a cultural landscape dominated by newer media such as television, video games, and the Internet. The heyday of minimalist fiction was the decade of the 1980s" (Rebein 2011).

Stefano Ercolino's article, "The Maximalist Novel" (2012), focuses on the novelistic genre, attempting at defining the new aesthetically hybrid genre of the contemporary novel which emerged in the United States of America in the 1970s and spread to Europe at the beginning of the 2000s. The author analyses the powerful symbolic identity of the maximalist novel and explores its traits, such as: length, encyclopaedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narrative omniscience, paranoid imagination, intersemioticity, ethical commitment, in a number of seven contemporary novels.

In 2014 Ercolino published his book, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666* in which he elaborates on the maximalist paradigms. As support for his enterprise, the author reviews some other theoretical approaches to narratives: Tom LeClair's "systems novel", Franco Moretti's "world text", and Frederick R. Karl's "Mega-Novel", all having a "common focus on investigation: long, superabundant, hypertrophic narratives, both in form and content" (Ercolino 2014: 1)

A lengthy novel is both a possibility and indispensability for experimental fiction as long as the procedure or the new genre emerges from the quantum of details of the text, because it offers the space for a diversity of procedures/rhetorical devices - encyclopaedism, chorality, digressions, a multitude of narrative threads.

According to Ercolino, modernism witnessed the origins of the "encyclopedic narratives" (Mendelson 1976) in Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the "encyclopedic novel" being considered by the latter a genre of the Western novel (Burn 2007). Anyway, the goal of encyclopedic narratives is a "synthetic representation of the *totality* of the real" (Ercolino 2014: 2), thus responding to the novelists' desire of conceptually mastering the more and more complex and elusive reality, of representing it and the fields of knowledge necessary for its synthesis. Yet, in order to specify the criteria on the basis of which a novel is considered encyclopedic, a specific modality has to be taken into consideration and that is the encyclopedic mode, defined as an instrument, "a particular aesthetic and cognitive attitude, consisting of a more or less heightened and totalizing narrative tension in the synthetic representation of heterogenous realities and domains of knowledge, ascribable, in essence, to the powerful hybridization of maximalist narratives with the ancient epic." (Ercolino 2014: 39)

Another maximalist trait, chorality refers to the plurality of voices, none of them being the dominant one. In the novels circumscribed to the genre, narration is fragmented, i.e., fragments of different lengths, separated one from the other by typographical spacing (signaling a change of scene, variation in point of view, transition in time/space, introduction/recommencement of a narrative thread, introducing a new character) co-exist with the traditional partition into parts and chapters. This is a multilinear diegetic organization – in the maximalist novel it is the collectivity of characters and the plurality of stories that counts; the autonomy of the parts is the procedure permitting a synthesis of the world (Ercolino 2014: 57-59).

The maximalist novel is polyphonic, insists Ercolino, as it is heterogeneous, represents a large diversity of knowledge, languages, registers, styles, genres, characters, voices; yet polyphony never degenerates into chaos as long as there are ordering criteria to the story (2014).

The diegetic material of the maximalist novel is extremely abundant: a hypertrophic narration, innumerable characters and stories, themes and digressions – a discursive excess like an overflowing river, as LeClair, quoted by Ercolino, maintains: “Because the material of systems novel often seems to grow, rather than to be built, the noise, gaps, and the gratuitousness in the texts imply an open and natural system rather than a closed and artificial ordering.” (LeClair 1989 cited in Ercolino 2014). The main procedure by which the diegetic exuberance manifests itself is the digression, which, according to Portelli (1992) “contains all the world within one text.”

The completeness of a text is given by the relation at the level of the arrangement of the plot and the mechanisms of its production into specific structures, “imitative forms”, as LeClair names them. These structures are: geometrical, temporal and conceptual. Also, the omnivorous relationship with time is to be mentioned. As concerns the conceptual structures, they are: leitmotif, myth and intertextual forms.

Another characteristic of maximalist novel, narratorial omniscience, may vary from a more overt, “traditional” form of omniscience to a more complex one, which Ercolino defines as “omniscience through recomposition or derived omniscience” (2014: 97). According to the Pouillon/Todorov classification, to which Genette added the notion of “focalization”, there are three different narrative instances in which the reader perceives the narrated facts through the narrator’s agency: the narrator knows more than the character and zero focalization – classical omniscience; the narrator knows as much as the character and internal focalization – story with a point of view; the narrator knows less than the character and external focalization – in behaviourist stories. In most of the cases, the three focalizations co-exist and it may change within the same fragment. Besides, in maximalist novels it is necessary to construct a narratorial gaze apt at perceiving from above. (Ercolino 2014: 97-99). This omniscience is a form of the complex and diverse occurrence – the return of the author.

One of the characteristics of the postmodern narrative is paranoia. This is because the world, fiction included, is so very deeply obsessed with conspiracies, intrigues and schemes, so consequently it became a trait of the maximalist novel, paranoia being the motor of the maximalist literary imagination, playing the role of poiesis of fiction and constructing the plot, as Ercolino demonstrates in his book (Ercolino 2014: 105-106).

Contemporary literary imagery rests upon a semiotic exchange – hybridization for the maximalist novel with cinema, television, video, painting, comics, pop icons – hybrid imagery.

Another trait is ethical commitment – as Stefano Ercolino maintains:

[...] should be situated within a seam of continuity with the best *engagé* literary tradition of the twentieth century and not under the banner of a rupture with the postmodern literary system [...] the maximalist novel can be seen as a postmodern *recuperation* of postmodernist elements, or better still as a genre of contemporary novel generated by an *intereference* between modernist and postmodernist aesthetic codes [...] an *aesthetically hybrid genre* of the contemporary novel.

As concerns the thematic field of the maximalist novel, recurrent themes of great historical, political and social importance are pervasive, and thus the maximalist novel is perfectly inscribable in the tendency of (re)turning to the realism of the nineteenth century.

Maximalism – the tendency towards excess – creates a world in itself and of itself, as long as meaning is not inherent in the world and must be (re)created, but lies deep inside, and not on the surface. Maximalism uses great details to set up scenes; it allows the writers to experiment with as many different themes, symbols, and literary motifs as they wish, and elaborate more on characters, to alternate – due to its flexibility and richness of the language – rhythms, plans, even realities. Moreover, its lengthy narration is more appropriate to the professed tendency of revisiting the past the more so as the nineteenth-century epitomic novels of Balzac, Dickens, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, et cetera, were, similarly, hundred-pages long.

To conclude, we shall say that indeed, mimesis was the dominant theory of literary realism. The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first are characterized by an effusion of many new versions of realism, sometimes hybridized. Literary post-postmodern realism(s) are circumscribed to an epoch that does not totally disallow modern techniques and devices.

Nowadays, the multi-faceted realism is, let us put it this way, a reality; the twentieth and twenty-first centuries novels share all sorts of realism, albeit social, magical, hysterical, critical, commercial, gender realism, postrealism or hyperrealism, and so on and so forth, or, as it is the case with most fictional works, a hybrid type of realism.

Notes

[1] Terms proposed by Alan Kirby: “[digimodernism] owes its emergence and pre-eminence to the computerization of text, which yields a new form of textuality characterized in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple-authorship”.

- [2] Term proposed by the cultural theorist, Robert Samuels: “technological automation and human autonomy”.
- [3] Term coined in 2000 by the American anthropologist Eric Lawrence Gans to describe the epoch after postmodernism in ethical and socio-political terms.
- [4] Term proposed by Nicholas Bourriaud: a “synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism”.
- [5] The term “neurotic realism” was coined by Charles Saatchi referring to a new trend in British visual art that was shown in a two-part exhibition 1998-1999.

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